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ABSTRACT

This cross-cultural study of social class and parent involvement in schools brings together data from Boston, Massachusetts, Liverpool, England, and Portugal. Interviews conducted with 350 teachers and low income parents sought to understand the nature and extent of the contacts between schools and families. The perspective was that children grow up in a web of institutions and that children are better served when there are positive connections among all parts. Literature concerning parent involvement in various social classes is reviewed. The findings are the following: (1) few families of low socioeconomic status have much contact with the schools; (2) when they do have contact their communications with the schools are primarily negative; (3) the view of many teachers is that families should follow a middle class model of contact; (4) school personnel appear to think of low income families as deficient; (5) school personnel think of parents as hard-to-reach or apathetic; (6) many low income parents have low assessments of themselves; (7) in all three countries parents expressed strong interest in their children's education; (8) many of the parents said they were satisfied with the schools; (9) cross cultural differences were found in how parents help their children with school work at home; and (10) school personnel had little interest in helping to overcome the inequities experienced by low income families. A list of references is provided. (VM)

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POOR FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS:

An exploratory study of the perspectives of low-income parents and teachers in Boston, Liverpool, and Portugal.

Exerpts from a presentation prepared for the Conference of the American Educational Research Association, April 8, 1988, New Orleans, by Don Davies, President, Institute for Responsive Education and Professor of Education, Boston University.

Background

The social class barriers to reaping the benefits of parent involvement are now being examined in a cross-national study of the Institute for Responsive Education. In the first phase of the work, data have been gathered through about 350 interviews with parents and teachers in Boston, Liverpool, and several cities and towns in Portugal. These sites were selected because in all three high percentages of children suffer both low achievement in the schools and a high incidence of poverty.

The study, which is exploratory in nature and not based on random samples, seeks to shed some light on the relationships between low income/low status parents and public elementary schools.

The hope of the study team is to stimulate more research and to provoke the interest and reactions of teachers, school officials, university and teacher education leaders, political leaders, and parents. Our aims are both more research and action to produce more extensive and fruitful connections between schools and the families and communities they serve in order to make education more effective and more equitable.

Purpose and Research Questions

The central purpose of this inquiry is to explore the issue of the relationships between government-sponsored elementary schools in Boston, Liverpool and Portugal, and parents who have low economic and social status. To do this we looked at school-home contacts in general as well as at the contacts with the least favored elements of the population.

The research questions for the exploratory study are as follows:

UD 026 167

1. What are the extent and types of contacts between schools and families? Are these considered to be adequate by parents and teachers?

2. What do teachers and parents see as ideal in home-school relationships?

3. Are there particular groups of parents who are considered to be hard-to-reach or for whom the school-family relationship is seen to be problematic? What are their characteristics? Why are school-family relationships for these groups difficult?

4. What is being done or proposed (and by whom) about the above problem? What external agencies could help to address the problem?

5. How do low economic or social status parents assess the schools and the relationships between schools and families? Do they believe school is useful and important for their children? What do they see as the main purpose and benefits of schooling for their children?

Methodology and Approach

Non-random, constructed samples of low-income parents and teachers (kindergarten, primary, and elementary) were interviewed in all three locations, using a common interview with some questions added in each country. In Boston, the interviews were conducted by a study team of about eight parents and graduate students; in Portugal interviewing was done by a team of about 15 Portuguese teachers and teacher training faculty. The interviewing in Liverpool was done by the Principal Investigator. About 350 interviews were conducted in the three sites.

Framework

Two perspectives guided the planning for the study and the analysis of the results.

First, we took an ecological view to the problem, seeing children as growing up in a web of institutions — including family, neighborhood,
school, the social and health agencies that serve children, local government, and private employers. The complex setting which children influence and are influenced by is like any ecosystem — what happens in one part affects the other parts. The interests of a child will be better served when there are good connections in all of the parts of this "ecosystem."

The lack of "good connections" may be a prediction of academic or social dysfunction in the social or academic development of the child. This perspective is based on work on the ecology of human development by Urie Bronfenbrenner, Moncreiff Cochran,

and others at Cornell University (Cochran, and Henderson. 1986; Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The second perspective comes from an analysis of the potential benefits of parent involvement and social class barriers to realizing those benefits.

The potential benefits of parent involvement were usefully summarized in Britain's influential Plowden report in the late 1960s:

> o by involving parents the children may be helped
> o by involving parents the parents may be helped
> o by involving parents the schools may be helped
> o by involving parents the prospects of a more democratic society may be advanced.

(Children and their Primary Schools, 1967).

This capsule view touches all the points emphasized over the past twenty years by scores of studies and reports. There is substantial research linking parent involvement to child development and to the academic and social success of children in school. Ann Henderson in two especially useful reports summarizes this research. She concludes:

> When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools ... Children whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with the school score higher than children of similar aptitude and family background whose parents are not involved (Henderson, 1987).

In addition, many social scientists and observers such as Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and Urie Bronfenbrenner have pointed out the negative effects on children of discontinuity between parents and the school (Lightfoot, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Parent involvement is also tied to benefits to parents including greater appreciation of their important role, their sense of adequacy and self-worth, strengthened social networks, and motivation to resume their own education.

Parent involvement also brings benefits to teachers and schools. Joyce Epstein has shown that teachers discover their lives are made easier if they get the help of parents and that parents who are involved tend to have more positive views of teachers (Epstein, 1986). Involvement can also lead to increased support of the schools and feelings of "ownership" (Becher, 1984). Increased political support and willingness to pay taxes to support the schools are important by-products.

Parent involvement in education can contribute to the individual empowerment of parents and, hence, to their competence and motivation to participate in the political process as individuals

and collectively with their neighbors and others with similar interests. As parents become empowered individually and collectively, they can become a part of social movements which can influence educational policies which hopefully advance democratization and educational equity.

Children from low income and low social status homes have the most to gain from parent involvement. However, most attempts at parent involvement attract and are most accessible to middle-class parents (Davies, 1987). If only middle-class parents are substantially involved, the gaps between children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and other children may grow greater rather than be narrowed. The efforts of school reformers for greater equity will be thwarted.

Major findings

The following impressions come from an analysis of the interviews in all three. The results were remarkably similar, despite the substantial differences in culture and political tradition in the three places.

1. In a majority of schools in all three locales there is little involvement in the schools by parents regardless of social class. Most parents of low socioeconomic status have little or no contact with the schools. Yet, there are important exceptions: individual teachers, schools, projects, programs, and organizations that are working to involve parents with a special concern for low status families.

2. Communication between the schools and low socioeconomic families is primarily negative, focused largely on academic and behavioral problems of children. Most of these parents hear from the school only when their child is in trouble.

3. Many teachers and school officials have a standardized view of the proper role of parents in schooling and a conventional middle-class model of what constitutes "good families" and proper childrearing. Children from families who deviate from these middle-class norms are expected by many educators to have trouble in school -- to be behavior problems and low achievers. For example, one teacher in Portugal said: "As soon as I saw and talked to the mother, I knew that boy would have trouble in school." A teacher in Liverpool commented: "Well, what can we expect of these children. We do the best we can, but look at the homes they come from."

4. Teachers and administrators appear to think of low income/low status families as being "deficient." Many dwell on family and conditions such as crime, alcoholism, promiscuity, poor living conditions, and the like and talk little about the strengths that all families and neighborhoods have.

5. Teachers and administrators believe that many parents

are "hard-to-reach." They agree that these hard-to-reach parents are primarily those who are poor or from socially marginal groups (e.g., immigrants, people with a different native language), and single parent families regardless of social class. They also, by and large, agree that the causes of the problem of parents being hard-to-reach are characteristics of the parents and their home and neighborhood conditions. Many appear to believe that the parents do not have the time, interest, or competence to be involved and that many simply do not care about school or value education. "Parent apathy" is a recurring theme. Only a minority of the educator respondents in any of the three countries in this study talk about the possibility that school policies and practices or educator attitudes may be a part of the problem.

6. Many low income/low social status parents have a low assessment of themselves in relation to being able to be involved in their child's education at home or in the school and low expectations for their own children's achievement in school. They often see themselves as not being very smart and many talk about how they did not do well in school, did not learn much, and were academic failures.

7. In all three countries, most parents express strong interest in their child's education, talk about the importance of schools, and many say they would like to be more involved in the school or at home in helping their children. "I'd like to help, but I don't know how" was a theme often expressed in one way or another. There is something flawed about the term and concept of "hard-to-reach" parents. Most of the parents in our study were "reachable," but the schools were either not trying to involve them or were not knowledgeable about or sensitive to ways to overcome cultural and social class barriers. Much can be done if there is the political will to act. This is evident because there are some schools and some teachers and administrators who are trying and enjoying some success.

8. A large majority of parents in all three countries say they are satisfied with the schools. The grades they give to their child's school range from F to A, but the median grade is a C+ or B-.

9. There were differences between the three sites in regard to what parents say they do to help their children at home in relation to school work. In Boston, nearly two-thirds reported activities such as checking on children's homework or reading a story. In Liverpool about half of the parents report these activities; in Portugal only one-fourth say that they do these kinds of things. However, in Portugal, many mothers say they would like to help if they knew how and if they had more time.

10. Both teachers and parents in the three countries express little interest in potential role of schools to overcome for individual children or groups of children the social and

economic inequities of the social system. Similarly, there were no comments at all that connected schools, schooling, or teachers to any broad national economic or social goals: making the country more productive and competitive, solving problems of poverty or unemployment, or realizing the goals of a more active citizenry, working to extend the benefits of social justice and democratic participation to all segments of the society. A few Boston teachers talked about these broader social goals but none of the parents.

Overcoming Barriers to involvement

One of the purposes of the study was to find good examples of efforts to form better connections between schools and low-income families and with other parts of the child's world. There were several good examples discovered in each country.

Three efforts, one in each of the three countries of the study, will help to illustrate some of the elements that should be considered by those who seek to overcome social class barriers.

The Boston Example

In Boston, a new, innovative Early Learning Center (ELC) for children from 3 to 5 years old has been created as a part of the public school system, with support from Wheelock College, Boston University, and IRE. The ELC, which stresses a developmental approach to education and child care in an all-day, year-round schedule, is working closely with the Center's families and with other institutions and agencies in the area which form a part of their ecosystem. The Parent Coordinator and Social Services Coordinator plan to implement a home visitor and parent support program using the concepts and materials developed in the Family Matters program at Cornell University. The program will involve parents who are labeled as hard-to-reach on their own turf, in their homes and neighborhood settings. Home visits by well-trained staff and the development of parent networks and informal support groups will form the core of the effort. The Family Matters program is based on a few key assumptions which are tuned to the need to overcome social class and cultural barriers. These concepts include:

1. The aim is empowerment. Empowerment is a "process through which people become more able to influence those people and organizations that affect their lives and the lives of those they care about" (Vanderslice, 1984). Moncrieff Cochran links empowerment as well to helping individuals to remove obstacles which impede their efforts to achieve equal status in society (Cochran, 1985).

2. All families have strengths. One aim of the program is to help families overcome obstacles to their effective functioning. The concept rejects the deficit assessment of "hard-to-reach"

parents which places most of the blame for their lack of contact with the school on their characteristics, attitudes, and conditions.

3. Cultural differences are both valid and valuable. Diversity is not a disease to be cured or an aberration to be stamped out by experts.

4. Many family forms exist and are legitimate. There is no single pattern that determines healthy child and family development. Yet, the number and types of resources that parents can marshal is a key factor (Kenniston, 1977).

Such home-based work is seen as a starting point which can lead parents to be positively involved in their schools the children attend.

The Liverpool Example

The second promising effort, the Parent Support Program, is in operation in about seventeen Liverpool nursery, primary, and junior schools. The program operates Parent Centers in one or two surplus classrooms in each school. Each Center has two paid staff -- a Teacher Keyworker and an Outreach Worker. The Keyworker is a regular teacher and thus has credibility with fellow teachers and the headteacher. The Outreach Worker is from the community served and has credibility with the parents. The program, which has been operating since 1979, has broad purposes, encompassing all of the benefits of parent involvement presented above. The aims include trying to break the cycle of deprivation through parent support and education, raising the level of academic achievement, responding to the educational needs of the community, raising the parents' level of expectation and aspiration for their children, and encouraging parent-school interaction.

The Parent Support Program has a wide range of activities to work toward these purposes. These include daily opportunities for parents to drop in at the Center for informal visits with other parents. Parent Support Program staff, and teachers in the school; mother-toddler sessions to help mothers increase their understanding of child development; home visits to help with parent stress and family problems (working in close coordination wuth the area social worker); community newsletters and social events; help with preparing and using home teaching materials; and a wide range of formal and informal courses and workshops.

The Portugal Example

Among several promising programs in Portugal is an action research project undertaken by the Instituto de Estudos Para Desenvolvimento, with the support of the van Leer Foundation. In its first two years, the project had these aims:

Changing teachers' attitude to overcome their devaluing of working class children and families.
Planning new, positive relations between parents and the community.
Promotion within the community by local authorities, groups, agencies, and other institutions initiatives which favor the education of children from low-income families.

The project is in its third year, and the emphasis is shifting to applying the approaches and materials which have been developed in several teacher training institutions in different parts of the country to the continuing preparation of primary school teachers.

In the first two years, action research methodology was used to bring the teachers out of the school into the community to study, observe, and better understand the culture of working class children. For example, some teachers observed extensively and discovered the rich and varied language used by children on the street and in play areas in the neighborhoods. Action research techniques were also used to help teachers see the different and sometimes subtle resistances that operate in the classroom to prevent the success of poor and working class children.

By using a combination of observation, studies, and reflection, the teachers are helped to understand better and modify their own behavior with children and their families.

Final Note

These brief descriptions of promising programs in different settings are meant only to be illustrative of many kinds of actions that might be taken by teachers and administrators in schools if they want to increase the involvement of parent and low socioeconomic background as one important part of their efforts to break the link between poverty and social and academic failure in school.

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